

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH
BRIGADIER GENERAL KEVIN BERGNER, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF
FOR STRATEGIC EFFECTS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE-IRAQ
(VIA TELECONFERENCE)

MODERATOR: CHARLES HOLT

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MR. HOLT: Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, welcome to the bloggers
roundtable. And if -- do you have an opening statement, sir?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah, I do. I'll make a couple of comments if I could, and then I'll be glad to follow people's questions here.

First, let me just say thanks for the opportunity to do this. I haven't done one of these before. Bill Caldwell trained me the best he could before he left, but this was one of those I hadn't had a chance to do, so I look forward to getting to know all of you.

You're aware of this vicious attack that took place today on the Al-Askariya mosque in Samarra. It really is, in every aspect, an affront to the values and the dignity of people from all religions. And we have been -- we have been joining the people of Iraq in condemning this action. It really is further proof of the enemy's indiscriminate violence and the depths to which they will go to incite hatred.

We have joined Prime Minister Maliki in urging all Iraqis to remain calm and to allow appropriate responses to come from the legitimate security forces of Iraq. And so far, our units are reporting that that is taking place; that there is restraint, there is -- there has been some peaceful gatherings, but nothing that's out of normal atmospherics. This afternoon, Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus met with the prime minister, and they agreed that they would work together to take a number of military and political actions to promote security and restraint in the wake of this attack. So this will be a cooperative endeavor as we support the government of Iraq.

Prime Minister Maliki has taken some initial steps. He has announced a curfew, which is in effect, as one of those steps to help restrain people from the emotional response that would likely come from this. He has deployed additional Iraqi security forces to Samarra. And he has also publicly announced that there will be an investigative commission that will determine exactly what happened and recommend appropriate steps to the government of Iraq.

So we have agreed to work with him on all of that and support them. We will provide some technical forensics kinds of expertise, but this will be a government of Iraq-led inquiry in the way forward.

The prime minister, I am told, did take an aerial trip and assess the situation, along with his MOD and his MOI. So they are getting a -- they are either getting or had had a firsthand look at exactly what happened and an assessment in person.

The one comment that I would -- that I would end with here is, when Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus met with the Iraqi leaders, it wasn't just Prime Minister Maliki; it was also President Talabani and the other political leaders from across the government. There was a very strong sense that this was galvanizing Iraq's leaders. They were very -- they were very unified in condemning the attack, they were very unified in calling for restraint, and they were very unified in their commitment to one another and making sure that this did not somehow disrupt or split the political leadership.

So if there's anything that we could hope for that might come out of something as vicious and tragic as this attack, it might be the galvanizing of the Iraqi leadership that could not only help the Iraqi people get through this difficult moment, but perhaps also compel them to move forward in the same spirit.

So that's a quick summary of what we know and where we are with this. And I'd be glad to talk to you about other details or other things you might want other ask about.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you, sir. Brigadier General Kevin Bergner with us for the bloggers roundtable.

And once again, I'd like to ask you that when you ask your question, to state your name and your organization.

And Andrew, why don't you start us off.

Q Good afternoon, general. This is Andrew Lubin from ON Point. Yeah, we were hoping on your first one of these to give you some easy, softball question, but I guess not, I'm afraid.

With the bombing of the mosque today, in the past couple of days the insurgents are targeting the infrastructure -- targeting the bridges south of Baghdad in Babil Province -- we're losing soldiers every day. I see in today's New York Times, Prime Minister Maliki is being quoted as saying, "We have eliminated the danger of sectarian violence." A, is he serious? And B, is this spiraling out of control?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, Andrew, let me start off with your very first comment, which was you would like to have given me a little bit more of a softball on my first call with you guys.

I served in Mosul in 2005, and I've got to tell you that during my time in Mosul I didn't have a single softball; it was tough fighting every day. And so I am not unfamiliar with the challenge of what we're now dealing with here, but I do appreciate your sentiment.

Q We do the best we can, sir. What can I say. (Laughs.)

GEN. BERGNER: Let me talk about what your point was just a little bit. We have -- you know, we have four of the five brigades on the ground here now for about a month. And the last brigade, along with the MEW (ph) and the combat aviation units, are now here and are operating and beginning to take responsibility for their sector in the coming days, in maybe a week or so.

We have significantly increased the pressure on al Qaeda. We are going places where they have not had us operating -- South Baghdad, for example. Two days ago, the 4th Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division discovered a IED cache that was clearly an

important part of their operating base -- extensive explosives, homemade explosives, artillery and mortar rounds, igniters, initiating devices, all of those things that are clearly part of a big support base.

In Fallujah, about 10 days ago, we discovered a truck-bomb factory that was also an important and well-developed support base for al Qaeda.

We took out the al Qaeda emir of Mosul last night. This was what was termed as the "military emir" of Mosul. We found in his possession a suicide vest. We found all the other indicators that he was involved in suicide vests and IED attacks in the northern part of the sector.

And we have taken out a number of other targets. Most importantly, this morning, soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division operating in east Baghdad located a mortar cell; detained six people, along with a complete 120mm mortar, a complete 82mm mortar system; and then three 60mm mortar systems, along with the people in the van and all the other paraphernalia associated with it.

So the picture I'm portraying for you is one where there is a significant level of pressure that's now taking away the elements that these extremist forces have been using to operate against us. You know that we have intensified our operations in the belts because they're necessary to control the approaches to Baghdad. You know that we have deployed more forces to Baqubah and Diyala Province, and we're going there because that's where al Qaeda is trying to go. And so we're adjusting our plan to pursue them every time they try to escape from the pressure that we're putting on.

So the picture I'd like you to also have a better sense of is these forces that are now operating in more places and at much higher tempo are putting these guys in whole different situation.

You asked specifically about targeting bridges. The military significance of those things is something that we have -- we have all the tools to counter. I mean, we have -- we have our own bridging capability to lay down on top of the crater or to bridge the gap. We have the mobility, where necessary, to bypass and use some other route. It's really another indicator of their indiscriminate violence in targeting the Iraqi people because ultimately it's disrupting commerce, it's disrupting the Iraqi people more than it's disrupting the military operations.

You asked also about casualties. And you know, you guys all know how we feel about that. Every one of these troopers that we leave -- that we lose is a tragic loss, and it bothers us a great deal. It's also, though -- it's also a reflection of how hard we're fighting, how much pressure we're seeking to put on the enemy, how many places we're going with so many more troops. And so, yes, it is tough, and it's going to probably get harder before it gets easier. But the pressure is increasingly pressure on al Qaeda and the other extremist networks that we're operating against.

So that's the circumstance that this takes place in today. And there's no question that all of the operations I just described are putting them in a position where they are going to increasingly stoop to the depths of depravity that you see, targeting one of the most revered Shi'ite holy sites in Iraq.

So that's kind of some balance to that and I hope that gives you a little bit of context. And that's not to say this isn't a tough fight. It is. We are going to have a tough fight for the rest of the summer, but we're going to have a great force in place to do it, too.

Q Great. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Michael.

Q General, thanks so much for doing this. This is really informative.

I was hoping that you could again speak to casualties, just because it's something we're grappling with. And you know, I think from our perspective we understand that it's likely to get worse before it gets better. This is something I feel like it's very difficult to explain to readers. And if you could just talk for a little bit about, you know, how we discern whether a rise in casualties might be part of winning the -- how we might discern that from a rise in casualties might be part of things going sour, and how -- what sort of signs you guys are looking for.

GEN. BERGNER: Well, Michael, I guess the first one I'd point out is -- and I go back to the comment I made to Andrew a minute ago, which is I'm a soldier, I've been doing this for a while, and I could never have this conversation, in talking about the lives of our young men and women, without first telling you that it always disturbs us. You can't be an effective leader and a combat commander here and not be affected by that. We take it -- we take it hard, and so do our units, so do our troopers. So, yes, it bothers us. And we look at it just as you would expect us to, which is: Is there something that I need to do differently? Is there something that -- some other measure that I can take to protect our soldiers and sailors, airmen, Marines, all of them out there? So we're always looking at that.

But we also take a look at what is the result of the operations that we're increasingly involved in, and what do we see in terms of the effects those are having on the enemy. And you know, I mean, just the list that I rattled off for Andrew a minute ago shows you not only how many different places we're locating ourselves, how many places we're conducting offensive operations, but the precision that we're now able to do those operations with because of the information we're getting from the population, because we're out there with them now in these joint security stations and the result. I mean, taking down five complete mortar systems and six of the extremists who were using it and their van and the appropriate ammunition -- that's an enormous blow to the indirect fire network here. And I wish I could show you the pictures. Maybe we'll figure out a way to get those to you tonight of the weapons cache that Ricky Gibbs and his

brigade in the southern part of Baghdad took down the other day. I mean, these are not your hey I found something in the refrigerator of this house. These are date palm grove kinds of fields of stuff that are homemade explosives -- the igniters and everything else. So when we're taking those kinds of targets out and we're removing that kind of capability, that's a pretty good signal to us that our operations are being effective, and that we're having the necessary result.

The other way that we look at it is our operations in support of these joint security stations. And we look at the kind of interaction we have with the Iraqi people who we are there trying to help secure, and it's pretty remarkable. I was in Ramadi about 10 days ago. I rode around with Sergeant Cabrera (ph) and PFC Gonzales and had them show me the joint security station that they operate from. And what struck me was -- impressive on several levels -- was the Iraqi army, Iraqi police, not only in the stations but completely integrated with our forces, to the point that when we saw something in one of our ISR platforms and you were sitting there in this JSS looking at the screen of what the suspicious activity was. You had an Iraqi policeman there with his own radio talking to his own outpost which was up the street from what we were looking at. He vectors in his policemen to go investigate it. We're able to watch it on our ISR system and give feedback and have the QRF ready to deploy.

So those kinds of operations now are much broader. There's a much better interaction and integration of the ISF, and it's resulting in the kinds of outcomes that I mentioned. Every night we're operating against either an IED cell (and a mirror of that place ?) or some sort of secret cell extremist that's operating against us. And it's a steady drumbeat.

So, Michael, I guess that's a very long answer, and I apologize. But I wanted to give you kind of a sense of the other part of the casualty piece of this that puts some of that in context. I'll finish the way I started which is I could never do that. Go ahead.

Q Where do you feel -- what are your thoughts on morale relative to maybe last summer? Do you feel that there's higher morale given the new strategy?

GEN. BERGNER: My sense in the soldiers that I've been around -- I was downtown here in Baghdad a couple of days ago with 2nd Brigade of the 1st Cav. And I did a combat patrol with one of my older Stryker friends from Mosul and walked around and talked to his soldiers and got a sense from them. The sense that I got from them was I couldn't be more impressed or more proud. And you know the conditions we're under now. This is just beginning to be the hottest part of the year. They're out there operating and frequently billeting, quartering themselves in these JSSs, some of which are pretty rudimentary. And these guys were all over it. They've got tremendous morale. But you know, I'm not going to tell you there aren't soldiers out there that are struggling. This is hard, and I'm sure there are some of those, too. But my experience with the guys I've been riding with was really good. I was very impressed.

Q Thank you very much, General.

GEN. BERGNER: Okay.

MR. HOLT: All right, (Graham ?).

Q General, I'd like to ask you a question about security at the mosque that was bombed today. Can you tell us exactly who was protecting it and who they are most closely associated with?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah, you ask an important question. You know that we have always been very mindful and respectful of the reverence of these holy sites. And so we know that those are places Iraqi security forces have to have the responsibility for security. And in this case, it was Iraqi security forces. The unit on the ground and the investigative team that Prime Minister Maliki sent up there will give us a better sense of exactly who was involved in this case. But generally, you have Iraqi police that control the approaches and the neighborhoods adjacent to the shrine and then inside the shrine you generally have facility protective service is their formal name, and sometimes they're just referred to as shrine police who are responsible for the security inside the mosque itself. And that is what I'm told was the arrangement here when the attack took place. So there will have to be a little bit of -- I can't tell you how many of them are national police or if there was an Iraqi army unit right there. They're still gathering all the facts of exactly who was involved in the overall security.

Q Thank you. I'll wait for the report then.

GEN. BERGNER: Okay.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Is there anybody else? Anybody else join us?

All right. Any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, I have one. General, Andrew Lubin from ON Point.

In April I was lucky enough to lunch with Sheikh (Sattar ?), and he was telling me about how they're reaching out to the Sunnis in Baghdad. And we've seen the results in the last couple of weeks about the Sunnis in Amiriya (rising up ?) and working with the American military. Do you think the bombing today was a Sunni-led thing, number one? And number two, how is Sheikh (Sattar's ?) reach-out program working in the Baghdad area?

GEN. BERGNER: Great point, and I will talk about that in a little detail.

This attack has all the trappings and all the similar profile of other al Qaeda attacks. And there are some other facts of recent operations we've conducted in that area that would suggest that they're feeling the pressure there as well. And we'll find out more

about that. But right now our sense is that it was an al Qaeda-affiliated attack that resulted in that.

You asked about Sheikh (Sattar ?) and how it's going out there. We've been asked a lot lately about what we're doing with Sunni groups that are willing to step away from al Qaeda and take up arms against them to secure their own neighborhoods and help provide protection on a local basis. Our experience with Sheikh (Sattar ?) and the tribes of Anbar showed us that when you encourage that and you work closely with them to quickly move them into a formal MOI or MOD formation -- even if it's a provincial or provisional support unit or an auxiliary police unit of some kind -- get them organized and then rapidly get them through the training necessary for them to become integrated into an actual police unit and serve in that capacity, the program works very well.

And so what started as a tribal thing on a local basis out in Anbar has transitioned to the Anbar police academy being opened, the 7th Iraqi army division having a specific recruitment relationship with the localities in Anbar. And so what you've basically done is you've brought the local people and the local sheikhs to be integrated with their own government Iraqi security force formations. That's what we're doing in these other neighborhoods as well. When we find people in Amiriya who are willing to help locate al Qaeda and who are willing to help fight against al Qaeda, we're helping organize them and encourage them. And then rapidly get them moving into either a provisional formation or into the necessary police academy or army training so that they are quickly integrated into the Iraqi forces. And that's the model that we're using. Sometimes people kind of stop short and they just ask well, you're arming people in the neighborhoods. Well, yeah, we are, because we want to encourage them to fight and contribute to the security of these different locales. But that's not where it stops. It moves right into how do we get them organized into a formation that's under Iraqi government control. And so that's working. What we saw in Anbar was a good example.

I've been asked lately if things in Anbar are still secure, and is that movement still in tact, or are there efforts to upset it. And I tell people listen, this isn't going to be an uncontested effort. The sheikhs and the local people there have made progress. They've aligned themselves with their government and their security forces. You bet that al Qaeda and other extremists are going to come after them and try to disrupt that. The closer we get them integrated with their government and with their security forces, the more enduring the progress is going to be. And so that's why we focus so much on rapidly integrating them into the established security forces and connecting the dots between the people, the forces and their government.

Q Are you getting any Shi'a groups doing that? Or is this all kind of Sunni oriented or Sunni related?

GEN. BERGNER: I think it's most pronounced as it relates to al Qaeda.

Q Okay.

GEN. BERGNER: We already have some of the Shi'a political militias who have integrated people into the security forces, but it's not just a unilateral option. It's something that those who are willing to turn away from violence need to know that they have that option to do it and that we'll help them find a place to responsibly serve their country. So it's not a Sunni-specific thing, though certainly the examples I used would suggest it's most pronounced in those areas where al Qaeda is terrorizing Sunni neighborhoods.

Q So basically, do you see -- anybody else jump in. I'm sorry.

Do you see this as a Sunni versus Shi'a where the Sunnis are doing this because, a, it's al Qaeda and, b, there's more Shi'as than there are Sunnis? I mean, do you think this can be adopted by the Shi'as is what I'm getting at. They seem to be more on their own political timetable with Muqtada and everybody else.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. I think it has to be available across the political spectrum and the religious and ethnic spectrum. This is really just a fundamental aspect of a counterinsurgency program. You have to help work local security issues on a local level in order for the local people to find the confidence to stand up to the threats that they're having. And so it doesn't matter what the locality is. The nature of the effort is about local solutions to local security problems. And in the cases that we've been talking about, it just happens to be that many of these are Sunni neighborhoods that are drawing the line against al Qaeda.

Q Okay, great. Thank you very much. Appreciate the extra time.

GEN. BERGNER: Okay.

MR. HOLT: All right. General Bergner, thank you for being with us this afternoon -- or this evening in your case. And we really appreciate that, and we look forward to hearing from you again, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: I appreciate it, too. Thanks for your questions, and thanks very much for your support of our troopers.

I think -- Beth, you have to tell some folks something?

Does anybody need to talk to Beth Robbins who's my battle buddy here, keeps me straight?

MR. HOLT: I think we're good, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: I think they're good.

Beth, we're good.

Thanks, everybody, have a good evening.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

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